

# Rethinking the Online Exhibit— an investigation on how museums showcase their exhibits online

CPSC 490 Project Proposal

Cezar Mocan

Advisor: Holly Rushmeier

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## **Introduction**

Museums are the result of our organized effort of getting in touch with different times and places. Museums are accessible to people who are in their vicinity. Museums collect art. Museums exhibit art. Museums are communal spaces. Museums are sequential—sometimes. Museums are interactive, but the objects they are hosting is often not. Museums are media agnostic—unless they specialize on a certain type of media. Museums are real. Museums are physical. And lately, museums are virtual too.

Ever since the Graphical User Interface evolved to something more complex than a monochrome terminal, there have been efforts to take “the museum experience” into the virtual realm. One of the first such efforts was pursued by Apple in 1992, and resulted in *The Virtual Museum*[1]. A desktop application which used the CD as a distribution medium, *The Virtual Museum* was a pre-rendered 3D space, which allowed its users to move between multiple exhibitions across different rooms. Being an entirely computer-generated space, it had no counterpart in real life.

Once the World Wide Web became a widely used tool, prestigious museums around the world started developing their own websites, initially as means to having an online identity,

and further, as a way of reaching a wider audience when advertising their exhibits. As the capabilities of web technologies progressed, from just displaying formatted text 15 years ago, to being able to run an operating system entirely in browser[2] today, the online exhibit progressed as well, towards creating an interactive, immersive experience for the user. The high penetration rates of mobile technologies contribute to the same effect: beautifully designed, complex applications built to present objects that are found in the museum's collection, and even virtual reality attempts[3] of emulating the physical space.

This progress leads to a fundamental question: what is the purpose of an online exhibit today? Is it still attracting people towards the physical counterpart of the virtual realm? Or could it be considered a standalone act / story / experience?

The goal of this project is to investigate, analyze and critique the methods employed in presenting online exhibits today, as well as to come up with a prototype for a novel type of interaction.

### **Project structure**

Throughout its first part, the project will present different models of showcasing art museums' or galleries' work online and analyze the approaches through the frameworks presented in [4] or [5]. It will take into account factors such as interactivity, graphic design, information hierarchy, target audience, the type of exhibited work, etc. Online interactive presentations commissioned by large museums, such as MoMA's interactive presentation of Cindy Sherman's work[6], Tate Modern's *Gallery of Lost Art*[7] or review of Miroslav Balka, *How it is*[8] will be present in the analysis, together with more traditional approaches.

The second part of the project will propose a new variation of presenting work online, based on the preceding analysis. This will be targeted towards the upcoming exhibit of bronze statues at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, and will be tailored to the contents of the collection, at least by taking advantage of the 3-dimensionality of the objects.

## Timeline and deliverables

By *February 29th*: A complete list of online exhibits that will be evaluated. An established framework for evaluating them, as well as a rough report on their strengths and weaknesses as online experiences.

By *March 15th*: A first iteration on online bronze exhibition design. 360° photographs of 1-2 collection items.

By *March 30th*: Second iteration on design. Partial implementation. Javascript code for the 360° visualization. 360° photographs of 1-2 more collection items.

By *April 15th*: Third iteration on design. Almost complete implementation of the current design.

By *April 30th*: A rough draft containing the findings of the first part of the project, as well as a write-up of the ideas behind the prototype. A functional prototype and its source code.

*May 5th*: Final due date.

## References

[1] <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/vis.4340030305/abstract>

[2] <https://win95.ajf.me/>

[3]

<http://techcrunch.com/2015/11/17/museum-collections-enter-vr-with-the-launch-of-the-woofbert-vr-app-for-samsung-gear/>

[4] Marty, Paul, and Michael Twidale. "Lost in gallery space: A conceptual framework for analyzing the usability flaws of museum Web sites." *First Monday* 9.9 (2004).

[5] Soren, Barbara J., and Canadian Heritage Information Network. "Best practices in creating quality online experiences for museum users." *Museum management and curatorship* 20.2 (2005): 131-148.

[6] <http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2012/cindysherman/>

[7] <http://galleryoflostart.com/>

[8] <http://www2.tate.org.uk/miroslawbalka/>